

## The recall function of the press for public health advocacy: the case of AIDS

Public health advocacy and mass communication are two connected realities (1). Nowadays, illness became into social problems with the help of media. They not just distribute health information for the public opinion and medical community (2) , but also focus the attention, and public policies, towards specific health problems (3). Moreover, media condition the audience perceptions about health issues (4). In this context, the traditional gap between medical and journalistic cultures should be narrowed, and health professionals must become acquainted with media dynamics, and make deliberate use of them.

Downs developed the *Issue-attention cycle* to explain the way social problems are generated from its inception to disappearance. (5) From a bibliographic review, we applied this teoretical model to some media content analysis to explain the construction of AIDS as social problems until 90's (Graphic: part A) (6, 7). So, it was in the *pre-problem* stage -AIDS affected a selected few and was only known by experts - when a paper lead media to deal with this issue for the first time. (8) When Rock Hudson confirmed that he was HIV(+), the number of stories on AIDS increased to the point that it was perceived as a social problem –*alarmed discovery* stage-. From 1987 to 1990 the issue became to the *realizing the cost of significant progress* stage, in which media reflected the proposals of politicians and scientists. In the 90's, the media gradually started to pay less attention to AIDS –*gradual decline of intense public interest* stage- which led to the *post-problem* stage, where stories tend to disappear by the resolution of the problem or by competition with another issue.

As, after this stage, AIDS didn't seem to disappear from media agenda, we presented the hypothesis that, in some cases, media may develop a special dynamic that we could call "the recall function".

Our aim was to identify if the recall function took place, and kept AIDS in the public eye after the post-problem stage.

## **Method**

In order to study AIDS coverage in the post-problem stage, we did a content analysis of the three national and the one regional more difused Spanish newspapers between 1994 and 1996. Also, we analysed the two local Navarra newspapers in the same period. 1224 stories containing in the headline the terms AIDS, HIV, and seropositive and derivated words were analyzed. A descriptive study of frecuency was used to performe the graphic of newsworthiness.

## **Results**

The results revealed that: 1. There was an average of one story every 3 days which, after fifteen years, implied a permanence of AIDS in media. 2. AIDS coverage presented a cyclic recurrence on specific events (World AIDS day/Conferences) (Graphic: part B).

## **Discussion**

Media kept AIDS in their agendas even in the post-problem stage because the recall function may have contributed to maintain the issue as a social problem. AIDS case shows that the newness isn't essential to receive wide media coverage, and the attention paid to health issues is not always limited in time. In this sense, the artificial planning of

the reality of this health problem, with the schedule of specific events, by medical and political Institutions, also prompts journalists to plan the coverage of the issue. PH practitioners should realize that the periodic distribution of information to media, within commemoration dates and congress, can avoid that health issues cast into oblivion, and can be an important tool for public health advocacy.

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